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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE OFFICE OF INTERNAL OVERSIGHT SERVICES

Note by the Secretary-General

Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 48/218 B of 29 July 1994, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit, for the attention of the General Assembly, the attached report, conveyed to him by the Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services, on the investigation into the seminars of the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

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ANNEX

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the investigation into seminars of the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an inquiry following receipt of a report that the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples may have misused and wasted funds of the Organization which were spent for a seminar held in Trinidad and Tobago in July 1995. We found that the funds had been spent in full accordance with the rules and regulations governing such expenditures and that the seminar was held as provided in the programme budget as authorized by the General Assembly for the biennium 1994-1995. In our report we so advised the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, but as to the question whether the funds were wasted, we sought his comments.

2. In his response of 28 March 1996, the Under-Secretary-General stated: "I fully agree that every possible effort should be made towards economy, especially at this time of severe financial crisis". Further, as the purpose of holding the seminar in that venue, namely, to encourage participation by those most directly affected, the Non-Self-Governing Territories, was not validated by their attendance, with only four Territories (two from the region) participating, he concluded that "despite the effort, time and expense, the seminar would appear to have fallen short of its stated purpose". Subsequently, as questions continue to be raised concerning these seminars, the Under-Secretary-General asked the Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services to review them, and he agreed so to do.

3. The conduct of such a review is within the mandate of OIOS, which provides that reports of possible waste of resources, among its other terms of reference, may be made to and investigated by OIOS (General Assembly resolution 48/218 B of 29 July 1994, incorporating ST/SGB/268 of 23 November 1993; see also ST/SGB/273 of 7 September 1994 and ST/IC/1996/29 of 25 April 1996).

4. With the current severe financial crisis giving evidence of worsening, responsible managers, staff and others engaged in activities under the authority of the Organization have been required to become guardians of the funds of the Organization. Virtually every programme activity authorized by the General Assembly, including those given priority, is being scrutinized and re-evaluated for its contribution to the primary goals of the Organization, and all activities have been made subject to reduction if not elimination.

II. METHODOLOGY

5. Keeping these considerations in mind, OIOS conducted a limited-scope review of the expenditures of the Special Committee for those seminars. Because of plans for another seminar to be held in June 1996, OIOS was requested to expedite the review, which was conducted by the Investigations Section of the Office. At no point, from the decision to conduct this limited-scope inquiry to the review stages, inclusive, has OIOS questioned the intentions behind the holding of these seminars: the stated goals are clearly within the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations. However well meant, though, the product of the seminars and the associated costs are worthy of examination to determine if they lead to a waste of resources. Specifically, the review examined the purpose, the costs and the results (or outputs) of the seminars held since 1990. In that period, five seminars were held, two in 1990 and none in 1991 and 1994, as follows: 9-11 May 1990, Port Vila, Vanuatu; 19-21 June 1990, Bridgetown, Barbados; 17-19 June 1992, Saint George's, Grenada; 8-10 June 1993, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea; and 3-5 July 1995, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

6. For each of these seminars we obtained copies of the final report, which includes the agenda for the seminar, and the summary of the discussions and the recommendations that were adopted. We compared these to determine the context of the seminars and their outputs.

7. In order to determine the cost to the Organization of conducting these seminars, we obtained specific data for those who attended them and whose trip was paid for by the United Nations Secretariat:

(a) Copies of the travel authorization forms (PT.8) to determine that the seminar attendees were authorized to travel, as well as the airfare amounts authorized by the United Nations Travel Unit;

(b) Copies of the airline tickets to confirm the airfare cost (when available);

(c) The vendor payee cards located in the Accounts Division to determine the daily subsistence allowance paid to Special Committee members and United Nations staff members who attended the seminar;

(d) Voucher files maintained by the Executive Office for the General Assembly Affairs Division to determine the amount of daily subsistence allowance paid to the participants who were invited to attend the seminar, as well as other expenses incurred in connection with the seminar.

III. FACTS GATHERED

8. The examination by OIOS of the purpose, costs and outputs of the seminars revealed that the seminars continue to be held in accordance with the purposes of the Charter and the spirit of the Organization. However, the facts gathered in our inquiry indicate that the benefits of continuing to hold them now cannot be ascertained.

Purpose

9. The seminars are held in the Caribbean and Pacific regions to bring them close to the Non-Self-Governing Territories which are the directly affected parties. However, that admirable purpose is undermined by the limited attendance of the Territories themselves. Although 17 Territories have been directly concerned by these seminars, 6 Territories attended the June 1996 seminar; 5 Territories attended the June 1992 seminar; and only 4 Territories participated in each of the other four seminars. This level of participation cannot be explained by funding limitations as the Organization pays for their travel expenses.

Agenda

10. An examination of the topics discussed at the seminars under review evidences virtually no change from year to year.

11. For example, the item entitled "Implications for the island Territories of global warming, sea-level rise and other ecological hazards" has been discussed at the 1992, 1993 and 1995 seminars. Eleven of the 12 agenda items of the 1995 Port-of-Spain seminar had been discussed previously, at both the 1992 and 1993 seminars.

12. The holding of these annual seminars is difficult to reconcile with the need for them as the same matters are discussed year after year. The contribution of additional seminars to decolonization, if no new discussion areas are introduced, may not enhance their raison d'être.

Outputs

13. Although the topics discussed at the seminars remained the same or similar, that lack of change could be accounted for by the difficulties associated with reaching consensus on the topics or by the expansion of discussion and debate on the topics. OIOS made a comparison of the reports issued by the Special Committee after each seminar in search of evidence of expanded debate or additional sub-topics.

14. We compared the recommendations and summaries of the discussions which were adopted at the conclusion of each of the seminars. Many of the recommendations made at the five seminars under review were identical in nature. For example, the recommendation concerning the development of regional programmes of cooperation in the management of regional economic exclusive zones to protect marine resources from illegal exploitation was adopted at the 1990, 1992 and 1993 seminars.

15. As with the seminar agendas discussed above, the value of the output of these seminars, given the similar if not fully identical results, is not apparent.

Costs

16. No records were available in the files of the Department of Political Affairs which indicated how much was spent for the two seminars held in 1990. OIOS estimates the total cost of the three seminars held in 1992, 1993 and 1995 at approximately US$ 375,000. If the average of that figure is used to estimate the costs of the two seminars held in 1990, the total for all five seminars would be approximately $625,000.

17. It is the cost of the seminars which gives rise to the current debate over their usefulness and achievements. Because of the absence of some records the total costs associated with all the seminars here reviewed could not be stated with complete precision. Our estimate is conservative and based on the available documents and the extrapolations from the costs of the three most recent seminars.

18. For the three seminars for which we have records, our analysis shows an average cost per participant whose expenses were paid by the United Nations Secretariat (as opposed to those paid for by their Governments, funds and programmes or other agencies) at a three-year average of $3,325.

Port Moresby, June 1996

19. The Pacific Regional Seminar was held at Port Moresby from 12 to 14 June 1996. The cost of the seminar was $135,900, which includes the travel expenses for the representatives, participants and staff; rental expenses; and hospitality and miscellaneous expenses. The Organization funded the participation of four Committee members, five representatives from Non-Self-Governing Territories, six special guests and five representatives from non-governmental organizations. The average cost per participant was $6,795. This is more than twice the average of the previous seminars. A review of the agenda items discussed at the seminar revealed that all but two of the items had been discussed at previous seminars. Furthermore, all but two of the 1995 Port-of-Spain seminar agenda items were again discussed a year later at Port Moresby.

IV. FINDINGS

20. While OIOS does not question the noble purpose of the seminars as the General Assembly has approved them, the issue of the efficient and effective use of funds for continuing to hold the seminars at a time of financial crisis for the Organization is worth objective and independent consideration. A review of the agenda items and the reports issued on the seminars demonstrates that they are largely duplicative.

21. The site selection seems to have little impact on the participation of the Territories affected; in recent years their participation has never exceeded 30 per cent. Participation in the seminar held in June 1996 was 38 per cent.

22. Although the programme of work of the seminars was approved by the General Assembly, the reasons for holding them and paying for them are not transparent.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

23. OIOS finds no evidence of violation of the rules, regulations or administrative issuances of the Organization. Moreover, the Special Committee has the authority of the General Assembly and the programme budget authorization to hold seminars in 1996-1997.

24. OIOS agreed with the position of the Department of Political Affairs, which was to raise with the Special Committee the question whether, given the seriousness of the current financial circumstances, the seminars needed to be held, and joined with the Department in requesting that the Special Committee reconsider its decision to hold the June 1996 seminar.

25. The Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs responded to the OIOS report by stating that he and his staff had repeatedly requested the Chairman of the Special Committee and its Bureau to consider postponing or cancelling its seminar in June 1996. His suggestion was not accepted by the Committee, some of whose members questioned the propriety and legitimacy of the Secretariat making such observations or suggestions, and the seminar was conducted at a cost of $135,900.

26. Without a compelling, and as yet unarticulated, reason for continuing to hold these seminars, there is the appearance of a waste of limited United Nations resources which, in the best interests of the United Nations, ought to be considered and explained publicly.

(Signed) Karl Th. PASCHKE
Under-Secretary-General for
Internal Oversight Services